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I Don’t Know Who Needs to Hear This, But…

By Eric-John Russell



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The mayor of Odessa, Texas is merely echoing an appeal that has become colloquially omnipresent: "People tend to be very independent minded—they're freethinkers, they do their own research... Whether you agree or disagree on the vaccines, I personally think it's a matter of personal opinion."[1] Amid the proliferation of conspiracy theories and a hostile skepticism towards expertise, we are living in a moment when terms such as "fake news" and "post-truth" circulate freely within the popular lexicon, where objectivity has "become less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief."[2]

To get a grip on a social and political landscape which seems to spiral out with every newsfeed scroll, we need to go beyond understanding what constitutes public opinion today [3] and grasp subjective opinion itself as a historically specific mode of social communication and cultural transmission. While the contemporary autarchy of opinion seems to inaugurate an unprecedented epistemic relativism, more unsettling is how the growth of media punditry, demagogy, conspiracy theory, climate denialism, and misinformation generally elicit increasing respect for opinion as a sovereign standpoint for judging the world.

When does thinking become "opinion"? Or worse, when is all thinking reduced to opinion? This is hardly an esoteric philosophical question at a time when the world, with its modes of global interconnection and digital platforms, seems to drown in caustic political debate. More specifically, in tracing the genealogy of the modern conception of opinion, how might this form of knowledge relate to the contemporary rise of authoritarianism, particularly through what Frieder Vogelmann has called the "agitational logic" of opinion circulation through online platform communication, where what matters is only what generates the most clicks and keystrokes, quantitatively incentivizing and amplifying the loudest opinion?[4]

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historically specific manner of judging the world, from an irreducibly subjective standpoint. Of course, human beings have always had ideas and beliefs about the world. But it was only in the eighteenth century that the modern idea of subjective opinion began to emerge as part of an individualism braced with volatile political rights and new economic liberties. Before this, writers seldom saw opinion as a sociopolitical problem. In the eighteenth century, however, the socioeconomic and political significance of opinion and public opinion took shape, specifically through the way in which the social context of individual equality and political autonomy related to the inner conflicts of people in the formation of their selfhood.[6] Born amidst salon discussions, coffeehouse argument, and a blossoming mass press, "opinion" came to involve an idea of individual self-sufficiency situated within an image of society as an aggregate of separate atoms whose mutual relations allegedly led to a natural equilibrium. It is hardly coincidental that in French *l'opinion publique* did not emerge within the popular vernacular until this time, which saw the rise of commercial proprietorship and market fluidity pressing against the absolutist and noble structures of the *ancien régime* as part of the gradual transition in Europe from feudal monarchy to mercantile democracy.

This is visible in the French salons of the mid-eighteenth century, the meetings held in the urban homes of wealthy aristocrats, nobles, and financiers but attended by writers and other members of the non-noble Third Estate. Talk included gossip and discussions about theater, literature, painting, philosophy, morality, science, economics, and politics; there were also musical performances and poem recitals. Discussion at the salons increasingly turned towards the new discourse of political economy, which argued in part for removing barriers to enterprise to expand national wealth and increase tax revenue. Advocating free markets and the abolition of guild regulations, monopolies, and restrictions on the grain market, the salon discussions of political economy thematized the free circulation of commodities. This critique of the system of privileges and economic

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commerce and trade, here received their political corollary in the mandate for the free circulation of opinions. This development achieved formal statement in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen issued by the National Assembly on September 26, 1789, which at least formally guaranteed not only civic equality, but specifically, within Articles X and XI, the right to an opinion.

On the one hand, opinion emerged as a crucial political concept, a way to criticize absolutist policy-making. But more fundamentally, expanding commodity relations provided the model and architecture not just for the social form of the public sphere—its legal, moral and philosophically normative standard for civic equality—but more specifically, it provided the epistemological structure for the communication, sharing, and exchange of individual opinions, each held to be abstractly equivalent, equally valuable as a viewpoint. Thus *intellectual exchange* takes on its most literal meaning; the analogy of a marketplace of ideas is no mere analogy. Historically, there is a conflation between the ideas of business and the business of ideas.[8] Opinions, no less than commodities, must compete and freely circulate or otherwise relinquish their social character. And both fell within the political rubric of the sanctity of private property. In a word, opinion became an epistemological form unique to bourgeois society.

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Opinions can be based on prejudice or personal interest; they can be

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intensified solipsism – the "I feel…" or "that's just your opinion…" Opinions are easily observed, especially today, as hermetically sealed off not just from objective truth, but also from other opinions, so that any shared understanding between diverse social worlds risks collapse, as illustrated today by the mayor of Odessa.

The egalitarian promise that all opinions are formally equal carries with it something sinister, beyond a mere culture-war terrain of rivalry. Historically modelled on competitive market exchange, opinion in this modern form presupposes an opining subject partitioning itself apart from the living concreteness of the world, standing over its object. In this lies the problem of the peculiar certainty of opinion, captured well in the self-important yet void-directed stature of "I don't know who needs to hear this, but…," which has become a standard preface to opinionated social media posts. As Hegel wrote,

> [h]e who stays holding fast to the vanity of the fact that 'it seems so to *him*,' 'that *he* is of the opinion that…,' he who wants his utterances never to be taken as objective assertions of thought and judgement at all, must be left where he stands. His subjectivity concerns no one else.[9]

In studying what has been called by contemporary researchers "looking glass perceptions," statistical behavioral psychology has noted patterns in which people look out into the world and see only their own opinions reflected back. Such respondents "regard their own opinions as so sensible that they must be held by all other reasonable people."[10] In this way, the form of the opinion, because of its very subjectivity, becomes something irrefutable, something to which everybody must concede, lest they deprive others of subjectivity itself.

Paradoxically, opinion, which first appeared as a staple of individual autonomy, in the course of the twentieth century came to serve as a mark of social integration and group uniformity, especially within a society of standardized and industrial culture. Yet perhaps this was the trajectory of

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Nevertheless, today, having an opinion might be one of last enclaves from which we claim something as our own, even if very few opinions can actually be considered strictly our own. To suggest that one's opinions aren't one's own would appear as an absurdity, or at least suggest an individuality under great duress. Yet here we are.

Digital emaciation

Social media platforms are now the chief places of opinion crystallization, validation, and circulation. Any critical theory of opinion must therefore take stock of how media content is constructed, disseminated, and absorbed by individuals, and examine why such a landscape, which instills a stringent compulsion to have an opinion on virtually everything, technologically agitates capacities for reflection and judgment, faculties which are arguably central to opinion formation.

Digital opining is part of the general transfer of making judgments to machines through social media's algorithmically organized platforms of information and communication. The technological development of attention capture within a commodified digital infrastructure provides the terrain for opinion formation, circulation, and validation. For example, eye-tracking data and iris scanning—operative today on most devices—provide the analytics for designers to help regulate attentive behavior, not simply as an intrusive form of biometric surveillance, but more alarmingly, as structured to effect predetermined, routinized responses.[11] The goal is to design flat and frictionless interfaces of instantly forgettable stimuli, what is most "eye-catching" for a user's fixation, cross-referenced with what designers call "gaze time," blinks, patterns of scrolling and clicking. The aim is to direct the viewer's vision from one fixation to another.

But setting aside this environment of perceptual regimentation that forms

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commodified communication, it is worth pausing to ask whether an excess of information really means better judgment.[12] It could be argued that excessive information can overwhelm the opinionated subject with such a heteronomous and ephemeral information landscape that to gain a basic foothold for exercising judgment is difficult, while the evanescence of communication cannot assure the durability of ideas. It might even be that an overwhelming amount of circulating information only conceals a certain experiential emptiness under the semblance of opulence.[13]

But of course excessive information is not itself to blame for the problem of opinion today. Other factors ought to be considered. For example, as Walter Lippmann was aware already in the 1920s, most people have little time for the deliberation required for something like the cultivation of opinion.[14] Decades of subsequent opinion research confirmed that people readily voice opinions on issues they know little about.[15] Postwar public opinion scholars observed that "people express opinions on issues when they seem to know very little about them."[16] Since opinion centers in the self, lack of information is no bar to opinion formation and communication.[17] Yet the reverse is also true: so much information is today readily available at our fingertips that no topic prohibits us from weighing in, regardless of the amount of reflection it is given. As public opinion scholar Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann has demonstrated, we risk feelings of exclusion, ostracization, and irrelevance in the absence of having an opinion, as a measure of social participation and being "part of the conversation" so as not to plummet into a "spiral of silence."[18]

The organization of information through various digital metrics largely determines how opinions are formed and circulate. Subtle behavioral signals —patterns of browsing, purchasing, clicking, staring—are captured by the interface and assembled into metrics which are then packaged and distributed into opinion models statistically constructed to generate ever more

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from other statistically similar users. Over time, an opinion climate emerges that reinforces the platform's predictions, and what began as a momentary behavioral signal is transformed into a prediction about future collective engagement. In short, it is a schematism that predicts a statistical probability of reaction from behavioral patterns and then constructs an opinion climate confirming such a prediction.

Our stimulated engagement with networked information technologies—each click, keystroke and visual pause—generates a vast amount of data and metadata that, aside from being mined for monetization, "translates human spontaneity and patterns of behavior into the format that "smart" devices require in order to assist, helpfully mimic and conveniently outperform their users."[19] We adjust and diminish our range of behavior and expression to accommodate the responsiveness of the interface so that it performs with greater convenience. For example, a TikTok travel diary would do well to omit any quiet moments of uncertainty, reflection, or mundane detail, and instead find its audience with a quick-cut, sixty-second video layered with a soundtrack and only the most visually striking moments with a clearly packaged emotional takeaway. The range of possible expression is thus narrowed to accommodate the platform's demand for brevity, immediacy and engagement, and we are in turn rewarded by the interface itself, equipped with more entertainment, information, social connection, and convenience. Yet the danger of platforms remains, regardless of purpose or intention: an interface which, through dopamine-reward incentives, generates and spreads content that predetermines the scope of engagement, flattening discourse and expression as a criterion for being seen and heard into easily bifurcated and aggregated speech and image content.

To digitally opine is not simply to give voice to preexisting opinions. A rudimentary example here is the recommendation engine on many social media platforms, which quietly contours opinions by repeatedly associating them with others wholly different, resulting in the proximity seeming

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designed to maximize user engagement. Opinions are thus articulated through ready-made alignments, adopting tones—"I don't know who needs to hear this, but…"—and positions that arrive preformed by the flow of content curated by statistical metrics. Opinion, then, is neither wholly spontaneous nor entirely deliberate; it is carried along by what rises to the surface—by what is made prominent, repeated, and elicits the greatest reaction.

New channels of lateral communication have inaugurated what Rogers Brubaker has called new regimes of knowing and feeling, in which the ways of acquiring knowledge to form and express opinion are patterned through a new sociotechnical environment that not only introduces new forms of digital surveillance, but also inculcates preformed responses largely through commercial micro-targeting informed by sophisticated behavioral sciences, on the whole mobilizing and amplifying outrage and reaction.[20]

This technological opinion climate is structured by self-reflexivity, amplification, and aggregation. "Sharing one's opinion" becomes a feedback loop for anticipated matches to our monetizable preferences, tastes, and communication habits.[21] As the basis for an unprecedentedly quantified self, algorithms thus create new ways of knowing and sharing opinions, without what used to be requisite literacy levels or face-to-face visual cues, while simultaneously undermining a key tenet of modern subjectivity: the participation of the self in creating knowledge about the self, its capacity for self-reflection, judgment, and critique.[22] And this extends also to the dynamics of opinion groups, in which digital communities are not anchored to declared worldviews or convictions, but to the mandate of user optimization and its derivative behavioral profile. They cohere through predictive systems of attention capture, drawing individuals into groupings defined by likelihood of engagement. This gives rise to a particular mode of fragmentation: groups are continuously splintered into ever-finer clusters, filtered through a

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Aggravatedly opinionated

In this digital opinion climate, platform interfaces regiment our perception and the algorithmic organization of opinions optimizes engagement by reaffirming ready-made behavioral response patterns. At a time when far-right governments are being stacked with pro wrestlers, YouTubers, self-help gurus, and other flesh and blood memes, such an opinion climate is not irrelevant for understanding contemporary political developments. Its bellicose temper is conducive to a disposition towards authoritarian submission and aggression, often translated into fantasies of persecution, conspiracism, and binary or stereotypical thinking. It is not malicious intent, fake news, or censorship that is at issue here, but the way in which digital platforms bolster a certain aggravated state of engagement within their users.[23]

We see this in the way organized information algorithmically unfurls with the mandate that the longer you scroll, the more revenue is generated. Information has to retain attention, and is often achieved by utilizing the psychological tendency of users to stare longer at content that makes them angry and upset than at information that makes them feel good. The algorithms have learned to overwhelm the newsfeed with upsetting and even shocking material to encourage longer scrolling, to maximize user engagement, instrumentalizing what psychologists call the “negativity bias.”[24] This corresponds to studies that show how negative content tends to receive greater engagement, “meaning that things that make us angry, upset, or outraged are more likely to spread in our public discourse.”[25] A Facebo

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militias, and conspiracy theories, the fictitious user was flooded with such content, with the algorithm optimizing usage it had learned to be the most engaging by aggregating the behavioral signals of others.[26] It is important to emphasize here that such curation has no explicit ideological aim. It is designed purely to augment attention capture and optimization so that advertising revenue can be generated, having learned that retention is best optimized by escalation.[27]

The problem of contemporary authoritarianism can in part be approached through contemporary communications technologies.[28] Today's rapid-fire publicity circuses produce a banalization of the most horrific images and events.[29] States and non-state actors alike employing social media for warstreaming is only the most superficial example. Another is doomscrolling, which, as we transition from one issue to the next with seamless immediacy, structurally trivializes all posts. The terror is delivered into the palm of our hands, and in order for our opinions about the world to have any validity, they have to be reproduced, retweeted, and shared. The result is a particular type of incapacity for allowing the world to break in on us, instead defensively opining over it. Making explicit the relation between authoritarianism and such desensitization—constitutive of contemporary communications technologies and the tendency for emotional, intellectual, and sensual detachment—requires first a note about the nuanced dynamics of authoritarianism in the present moment.

It is no secret that the line of demarcation between the "legitimate" politician and the lunatic fringe of the extreme right continues to blur.[30] Yet this conflation is only one factor related to the rise of contemporary authoritarianism. Another is the circulation of opinion today, a social structure which penetrates deep into subjects even before demagogues can instrumentalize it. It is to the volatility of digital platforms against the backdrop of a disaggregated digital public that a collapsing common

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rival assertions and elevates any content capable of generating the most reaction; that is, it is a technological means of communication geared towards the reactionary, incentivizing emotional and indignant resonance while reinforcing a brazen certitude of opinion.

Of course, the emotional dimension here is not by itself the problem, but only when, in the words of Theodor W. Adorno, it is "harnessed to an obstinate insistence on being right, regardless of the relevance of what is said."[31] And such a tendency is indeed encouraged by the contemporary clickbait ethos of sensationalized headlines and amplified aggravation, reproduced by social media influencers and content creators. Rage-baiting and its resultant revenue streams become the contours of an informational reality requisite for forming an opinion, imbuing users with a certain cognitive rigidity that finds uncertainty intolerable since the technological schematism is designed towards the predictability of preferences and worldviews.[32] It is thanks to this need for the unambiguous that the contemporary demagogue finds his or her audience, requiring from them only the bare minimum, most often in a lauded freedom to express opinion, that is, most overtly, to *like* or *dislike*.[33]

Ever more aggravation

To be clear, it is not simply the political maneuverings of contemporary authoritarianism within social media that is at issue here,[34] but rather the authoritarian tendencies phenomenologically and epistemologically cultivated by technological platforms of frenetic communication that incentivize states of perpetual aggravation and guttural reaction, and how it is that the subjectivism of opinion today is an optimal bearer for such communication.[35] It is not for nothing that the accusation of being "too opinionated" elicits the shadow of coercion. Rather than an overt ideological conviction towards authority, contemporary authoritarian tendencies are cultivated within a communicative landscape of structured perception that tends to reduce and

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It is within this technological environment that political manipulation is capable of gaining traction. Authoritarianism today has digital platforms as its technological basis and is in no short supply of savvy and charismatic influencers peddling business strategies of aggravated response. This has been described as part of a sort of "neo-Bonapartist acclamation,"[36] with a central prerogative of emotional aggravation. Here, figures like Donald Trump or Matteo Salvini do not simply communicate directly with their supporters but actively provoke, inflame, and intensify reaction through disquieting, defiant, and unwieldy posts; cultivating outrage, resentment, and a sense of urgency. Binding such figures together is not simply right-wing ideology but a shared communicative logic within an opinion climate technologically structured to create a feedback loop in which supporters are continually and affectively aligned without the pressure or burden of forming their own judgments, since they arrive within one's feed ready-made. The goal is less to inform or persuade than to keep followers in a heightened emotional state, primed for rapid affirmation and galvanization. It is not by incompetence that most of Trump's tweets are fully capitalized dispatches.[37]

This is an opinion climate of permanent excitation, or what William Davies has called "the reaction economy,"[38] where content must be reproduced, liked, and shared to elicit further reactions, coordinating the social contours of an agitated and monetizable online world.[39] With the competitive compulsion to stand out, of wielding, so to speak, a hot take that can stand above all the rest, the hostility of all against all has become a successful business model, with platform companies privileging what is referred to as "opinion markets."[40] Opinions here become indistinguishable from memes; ready-made, transferrable cultural units as means of communication, and solidifying group identities. With regard to digital filter bubbles and echo chambers, this opinion climate not only neutralizes the epistemic impact of exposure to outsiders with contrary opinions, but in the development of new jargon for exaggerating the insularity and separateness of in-groups, the

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volatility, often towards "out-groups," acquire greater popularity and circulation.[41] Of course we are not talking here about simple distraction. Shares, comments, likes, scrolling time, browsing, and all other participatory metrics are systematically organized to elicit intense and heightened visceral reactions such as anger, indignation, and of course, through the schematism of echo chambers and filter bubbles, certain tribal affiliations and identities formed through curated algorithmic flows and consolidated around particular vocabularies, memes, and emotional triggers which demarcate boundaries and amplify polarization. Against the further background of diminishing attention spans and a weakening of the ability to follow extended arguments or narratives,[42] there is also the fragmentation of shared cultural reference points, challenging individuals to make judgments within a common frame of understanding, and to maintain consistent interpretations of the world across increasingly disjointed streams of information.

Digital tribal concentration does not take place through discursive dialogue or common intention, but coalesces in the quiet pull of identical feeds.[43] Its members do not arrive at consensus through argument, but drift into likeness through habit and repetition. What binds them is the unseen calculus of the algorithmic opinion climate of optimizing user engagement until a semblance of community takes hold, in turn fortifying a uniformity of opinion and reproducing conformity.[44] The result, as certain studies demonstrate, is that social media reproduces not a pluralistically open and discursive public for the free circulation of opinion, but recursive and partitioned publics in which particular opinions are reinforced, limiting debate between rival opinions, and geared towards group affiliations and dichotomies, fragmentation, and polarization.[45] Digital platforms are a parody of discussion forums where fragile social connection is technologically structured to comfortingly reaffirm existing opinions through either caustic hostility or the solidification of group belonging. Intolerance is perpetuated in either case, in which the sharing of opinion is no longer a deepening of shared understanding or experience, bu

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with truth, but with those monetizable opinions that have been formed, filtered, reproduced, circulated, and popularized through digital communications technology.[47] It is in this way that "[t]he border between healthy and pathogenic opinion is drawn *in praxi* by the prevailing authority, not by informed judgment."[48] Again, at issue here is not whether any opinion is true or false, but how the form of an opinion, not its content or subject matter, subsists within a particularly volatile media landscape that shapes our affective structures of public discourse.[49] Strictly in terms of form, an opinion, in order to successfully rival others, needs to be loud and aggressive. Its competitive edge is lost if not situated within this amphitheater for the performance of thinking and judgment, a sandwich board public sphere whose interfaces bait us into sharing, expressing, and publicizing ourselves into a monetizable brand.

An opinion of one's own

Opinion is more than mere knowledge. It is knowledge asserted by an inflated and self-certain subjectivity. The phrase "in my opinion" appears innocent enough, conceding that the knowledge to follow may be wrong. Yet it functions socially as a bulwark against reproach under the guise of modesty, giving to knowledge an unassailably objective status. As Adorno notes, by proclaiming an opinion to be one's own, one grants it authority.[50] The positing of an opinion is assumed to carry a peculiar truth and validity merely by being *my own* opinion. The fervor with which I hold and defend it—commit myself to it—is taken to confer upon it a certain authority, regardless of the content of the particular opinion. It is in the form of the opinion that the urge to prevail, to triumph in a contest of competing views, becomes a force of domination. "It amounts to the view that stubborn and blind subjective self-interest is and should remain the measure of all things."[51] In this way, and especially today, to question someone's opinion has become to challenge their very sense of self, to threaten "narcissistic injury."[52] Truth becomes a question of identity, a congruence made all the more stringent insofar as

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characterized as one's own, but is subject to a plethora of social, institutional, and technological schema through contemporary communications systems, then we might ask: what is the actual substance of this appeal to the authority of the self in a communications environment that kindles and rewards conformism and authoritarian aggression, expropriating subjectivity and emaciating critical faculties of competence?

With regard to individual identity formation, in the past, identity was gradually shaped within relatively stable institutions such as kinship, schools, and local communities, as well as through geographical proximity. Drawing on Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone*, Anton Jäger has observed that levels of civic engagement, union and church membership, and club and associational density, particularly in the US, have witnessed a secular decline since the 1990s; an overall erosion of civic life, with an online world offering brittle alternatives to social bonds and identity formation. Today, such formation is more likely to emerge from ongoing interaction with algorithmically curated content, and with it a "new form of ressentiment-driven politics."[54] The result is a more fluid but also more reactive sense of self—one shaped less by long-term commitments and more by immediate responses to what appears in a personalized feed.

If the self once harbored a certain impermeability, something like a private psychic homeland from which to gain a basic grip on the outside world, *homo opinicus* instead forfeits interiority as a condition for its individuated self-preservation. We thus end up in a place far worse than the *Innerlichkeit* which worried Hegel, yet advanced to an extreme as a socially objective development. In sum, opinions today exist in fraudulent form, robbing us of the "experience and the capacity to take a position."[55] Opinions are not censored in the traditional sense but outsourced to impersonal technologies of data collection and analysis. In the words of Günther Anders, "[t]he human being is no longer an entity capable of speech, such that he might express his own opinion with his own mouth."[56] Yet perhaps at no other time in histor

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However much it may appear so, an opinion is not the inherent property of a monad individual, crystalized through autonomously selected informational resources. Actual opinions remain bound to the social conditions in which they are formed, expressed, circulated, and altered. For this, the opinion is an eminently social form of knowledge which becomes actual in and through social relations, mediated by technological schemas no less than political and economic conditions. It is a reciprocal process for which group identification and its technological sedimentation are reflected in individual opinions, no less than the reverse with its scrolling, clicking, and viewing habits. Here it should be emphasized that it has not been the hypothesis of this analysis that all opinions are reducible to digital communications technologies, but only that such means of communications and their algorithmic organization uphold a certain aggravated criterion of opinion engagement. The opining subject as a tabula rasa of technological influence is only the correlate to the opining subject that projects its prejudices on all that surrounds it. A critical theory of opinion today ought to situate itself in between these poles, between the reciprocity of an overwhelming objective informational apparatus and a defensive subject that seeks only that which reasserts its own epistemic presumptions. Within the communicative mediums of both sides, opinion exchange, just as it did in the eighteenth century, adopts the model of a competitive society, and with it the assumption that opinions are the stable properties of individuals standing on equal footing, regardless of their relationship to truth.[57]

It is a thoroughly liberal image which posits individuals as entering public life equipped with an independence of mind capable of sifting through information and forming judgments in isolation from the surrounding world. Rather, long before exercising a robust capacity for judgment, individuals inherit an immeasurable stock of assumptions, dispositions, and ready-made convictions congealed by the prevailing intellectual climate and adopted

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and technological apparatuses that organize production, circulation, and consumption—including the consumption of ideas themselves.[58] In the present, digital communication technologies occupy a privileged place within this apparatus, furnishing the infrastructures through which opinions are increasingly anticipated, directed, and reproduced before they are ever experienced as one's own.[59]

Opinion appears as the assertion of proprietary self-preservation, accompanied today by polarized ressentiment palatable for authoritarian tendencies within market-modelled constellations of a discursive environment. The form of the opinion here refers to a particular type of asocial socialization characteristic of digital platforms of communication, not to some kind of wholly subjective or mental state, but to a structure of relations embedded within a hostile digital landscape of paper-thin online world personalities and bot-farm feuilletons. What is new about opinion is thus not so much its proprietary claim, which, as we have seen, characterized opinion from the eighteenth century forward, but its development as an extreme form of fortitude against the world, exemplified in our dear Odessa mayor, an epistemological refuge against all that might give pause and second thought. Ironically, this takes place at a moment where increasingly, to have an opinion "of one's own" has become thoroughly brittle, where opinions as self-aggrandizing entitlement have become, in the words of Anders, "so aggrandizing that they begin to feel inadequate themselves."[60]

Once a benchmark of individual autonomy, opinion appears instead as a means of solidifying identitarian profiles, group uniformity (if not outright cult behavior), and the technological schemas which have engulfed the individual, emaciating its cognitive, critical, and libidinal resources.[61] *Homo opinicus* adopts the standpoint "of being in charge, of having a say, of conducting oneself and considering oneself as an expert."[62] Yet the truth of subjectivity depends on that subject's ability to resist both its own illusions

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can only speculatively allude to a thinking beyond opinion, judgment beyond the habituated strength of mere platitudes and ticket-thinking which seems to make a "mockery of all self-determination."[63] It is there, however ill-defined, that we can take heed of Hegel's warning against knowledge lapsing into opinion; or at least concede that the illusion of extreme subjectivism to which opinion is both conceptually and historically anchored is but one moment in the development of knowledge. To hypostatize that moment of opinion as an irreducible standpoint of truth, arguably the epistemology of contemporary capitalism, is to amputate the legs of critique before it can even begin walking, never mind running, out of this world.

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1. Edgar Sandoval, Pooja Salhotra and Soumya Karlamangla (2025) "In Texas, Parents Fighting Vaccinations Say Their Movement Is Winning," *New York Times*, Sept. 18, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/18/us/politics/vaccine-mandates-covid-measles.html>.

2. 'Post-truth' was named as the 2016 word of the year by Oxford English Dictionary and 'postfaktisch' by the Gesellschaft für Deutsche Sprache.

3. For research on how large language models are being implemented by polling companies to emulate human responses with proxies of human behavior, thus undermining the very idea of traditionally measuring public opinion in what is called "silicon sampling," see Lisa P. Argyle, Ethan C. Busby, Nancy Fulda, Joshua R. Gubler, Christopher Rytting and David Wingate (2023) "Out of One, Many: Using Language Models to Simulate Human Samples," *Political Analysis* 31(3), pp. 337-351.

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5. G.W.F. Hegel (1995) *Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Volume I: Greek Philosophy to Plato*, University of Nebraska Press, p. 12.

6. Yet as Arnold Hauser reminds us: “There have always been strong, self-willed individuals, and Western man had already become conscious of his individuality in the Renaissance, but it is only since the middle of the eighteenth century that individualism as a challenge and a protest against the depersonalization inherent in the process of civilization has existed. It goes without saying that conflicts between the individual and the world, between the personality and society, between the citizen and the state, had also occurred in earlier periods […], but the antagonism had never been felt to flow from the individual character of the person in conflict with the collective unit.” Arnold Hauser (1999) *The Social History of Art Volume III: Rococo, Classicism and Romanticism*, Routledge, p. 54.

7. J.A.W. Gunn (1989) “Public opinion,” *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change*, Cambridge University Press, p. 253.

8. Pertinent here is Adorno’s observation that there exists a common ontology between public opinion and market forces, an affinity illustrated through the way in which the methodological history of public opinion research emerged through the methodological approaches of market research. See Theodor W. Adorno (2005) “Opinion research and publicness (Meinungsforschung und Öffentlichkeit),” *Sociological Theory* 23(1). See also Edward L. Bernays (2012) *Public Relations*, Snowball Publishing and Edward Bernays (2019) *Crystalizing Public Opinion*, Gildan Media.

9. G.W.F. Hegel (1985) “On the Relationship of Skepticism to Philosophy, Exposition of its Different Modifications and Comparisons of the Latest Form with the Ancient One,” *Between Kant and Hegel: Texts in the Development of Post-Kantian Idealism*, State University of New York Press, p. 338.

10. James M. Fields and Howard Schuman (1976) “Public Beliefs About the Beliefs of the Public,” *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 40(4) (Winter), p. 438.

11. See Jonathan Crary (2022) *Scorched Earth: Beyond the Digital Age to a Post-Capitalist World*, Verso, p. 111, for a particularly illuminating analysis of this tendency within the realm of visual response. As he writes: “Many assume that eye tracking is an intrusive form of biometric surveillance that identifies and archives the details of what we look at. But spying on individuals and their personal proclivities is not one of its main objectives. A more important goal is the discovery of large-scale regularities among targeted demographics, with the aim of financializing the harvested information.” (Ibid., pp. 110-111).

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persuade; it may aim simply to overwhelm. The result may be a paralyzing, demobilizing 'sense … that the truth is simply unknowable." The weaponization of abundance is not confined to authoritarian regimes. The strategy was given its classic formulation by Steve Bannon, in conversation with Michael Lewis in early 2018: 'The Democrats don't matter. … The real opposition is the media. And the way to deal with them is to flood the zone with shit.' Bannon was no longer President Trump's chief strategist at that time, but there is no better description of Trump's own skillful media practice." Rogers Brubaker (2023) *Hyperconnectivity and Its Discontents*, Polity Press, p. 132.

14. Walter Lippmann (1998) *Public Opinion*, Transaction Publishers.

15. Bernard Berelson (1952) "Democratic Theory and Public Opinion," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 16(3) (Fall), p. 318.

16. Berelson, "Democratic Theory and Public Opinion," p. 318.

17. Ample empirical studies and public opinion experiments demonstrating the tendency for survey respondents to assert their opinions despite having no prior knowledge of the topic at hand, can be found in George F. Bishop's (2004) *The Illusion of Public Opinion: Fact and Artifact in American Public Opinion Polls*, Rowman & Littlefield.

18. See Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1986) *The Spiral of Silence: Public Opinion – Our Social Skin*, University of Chicago Press.

19. Christopher John Müller (2016) *Prometheanism: Technology, Digital Culture and Human Obsolescence*, Rowman & Littlefield, p. 133.

20. Brubaker, *Hyperconnectivity and Its Discontents*, pp. 128-142.

21. The economic centrality of such informational engagement is of course here a crucial determination, whether one examines data extraction, content and bot farms or basic advertising streams and mechanisms within the attention economy. It is in this sense that epistemic deterioration can be viewed as a lucrative business strategy. The relation between opinion and the commodity has most recently been illuminated by Kalshi, a financial prediction market that began as a platform for sports betting, but now allows users, according to its CEO, to "monetize any difference of opinion." A.J. Dellinger (2025) "Kalshi CEO Says He Wants to Monetize 'Any Difference of Opinion'," *Gizmodo*, Dec. 4, <https://gizmodo.com/kalshi-ceo-says-he-wants-to-monetize-any-difference-in-opinion-2000695220>

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Öffentlichkeiten auf Twitter," pp. 53-64. See also C. Thi Nguyen and Bekka Williams (2020) "Moral Outrage Porn," *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 18(2), pp. 147-172.

24. See, for example, Seonhye Noh and Stuart Soroka (2025) "Negativity Biases Online: The Interplay of Individuals and Algorithms in News Consumption," *Journal of Media Psychology*, Vol. 37(5), pp. 1864-1105; Joe Watson, Sander van der Linden, Michael Watson, et al. (2024) "Negative online news articles are shared more to social media," *Scientific Reports* 14, 21592; Mei Zhang, Haotian Wu, Yang Huang, et al. (2024) "Negative news headlines are more attractive: negativity bias in online news reading and sharing," *Current Psychology*, 43, 30156–30169.

25. Petter Törnberg and Justus Uitermark (2022) "Tweeting ourselves to death: the cultural logic of digital capitalism," *Media, Culture & Society*, Vol. 44(3), p. 585. See also Jeffrey M. Berry and Sarah Sobieraj (2013) *The Outrage Industry: Political Opinion Media and the New Incivility*, Oxford University Press; M.J. Crockett (2017) "Moral outrage in the digital age," *Nature Human Behaviour*, Vol. 1(11), pp. 769–771.

26. Ryan Mac and Sheera Frankel (2021) "Internal Alarm, Public Shrugs: Facebook's Employees Dissect Its Election Role," *New York Times*, Oct. 22, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/22/technology/facebook-election-misinformation.html>.

27. See Zeynep Tufekci (2018) "YouTube, the Great Radicalizer," *New York Times*, March 10, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/10/opinion/sunday/youtube-politics-radical.html>.

28. A similar approach that attempts to integrate the political psychology of authoritarianism and media studies for the study of contemporary populism can be found in Lars Rensmann (2017) "The Noisy Counter-Revolution: Understanding the Cultural Conditions and Dynamics of Populist Politics in Europe in the Digital Age," *Politics and Governance*, Vol. 5(4), pp. 123-135.

29. See Günther Anders (1961) *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen: Über die Seele im Zeitalter der zweiten industriellen Revolution*, C.H. Beck Verlag, pp. 116-120.

30. This phenomenon is already observed by Herbert Marcuse in his 1970 foreword to the second edition of Leo Löwethal and Norbert Guterman (2021) *Prophets of Deceit: A Study of the Techniques of the American Agitator*, Verso, pp. xlii-xliv.

31. Theodor W. Adorno (2005) *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, Verso, p. 137.

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Current Psychology, Vol. 45, 706; Seyed Javad Emadi Chashmi, Jafar Hasani, Daria J. Kuss et al. (2023) "Tolerance for ambiguity, reappraisal, and suppression mediate the relationship between problematic internet use and procrastination," *Current Psychology*, Vol. 42, 27088–27109; Mohammad Belal, Nguyen Luong, Talayeh Aledavood, Juhi Kulshrestha (2026) "Examining the Association Between Internet Use and Perceived Stress in Adults: Longitudinal Observational Study Combining Web Tracking Data With Questionnaires," *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, Vol. 28.

33. First broached in Else Frenkel-Brunswik (1949) "Intolerance of Ambiguity as an emotional and perceptual personality variable," *Journal of Personality*, Vol. 18, pp. 108-143, the theme of an intolerance towards ambiguity and uncertainty as linked to authoritarian tendencies is taken up in Theodor W. Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel J. Levinson and R. Nevitt Sanford (1950) *The Authoritarian Personality*, Harper & Brothers, pp. 463-464. For more recent approaches, see Zygmunt Bauman (2010) *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty*, Polity Press; Samir Gandesha (2018) "'Identifying with the aggressor': From the Authoritarian to Neoliberal Personality," *Constellations* 25(1), pp. 147-164; David Jäger (2021) "Affirmativer Charakter heute," *Theodor W. Adorno: Aktualität und Perspektiven seiner Kritischen Theorie*, Verlag Westfälisches Dampfboot, pp. 176-198; Oliver Decker, Johannes Kiess, Ayline Heller, Elmar Brähler (eds.) (2024) *Vereint im Ressentiment. Autoritäre Dynamiken und rechtsextreme Einstellungen. Leipziger Autoritarismusstudie 2024*, Psychosozial.

34. Although important, such an analysis differs from the present investigation into the social epistemology of opinion. For the former, specifically in terms of the digital influence of authoritarian regimes, see Shanthi Kalathil (2020) "The Evolution of Authoritarian Digital Influence: Grappling with the New Normal," *PRISM*, Vol. 9(1), pp. 32-51.

35. This is a phenomena already nascently observed in the most famous 1940s "Studies in Prejudice" by Theodor W. Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality*, pp. 3-5, 232, 659, 663-664.

36. Anton Jäger (2026) *Hyperpolitics*, Verso, p. 72.

37. Quantitative studies of such "populist" communications strategies, both left and right, demonstrate that they make disproportionate use of social media as compared to more centrist parties. See Nicole Ernst, Sven Engesser, Florin Büchel, Sina Blassnig and Frank Esser (2017) "Extreme parties and populism: an analysis of Facebook and Twitter across six countries," *Information, Communication & Society*, Vol. 20(9), pp. 1347-1364.

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They do, however, lend themselves to reactionary, paranoid behaviour: vicious insults that seek to hurt and offend, to get under the other's skin, to find their weak spot and then to stick the knife in and violently twist it to exact the maximum degree of psychological pain. Twitter has a unique way of bringing out its users' inner sadists." Jason Hannan (2018) "Trolling ourselves to death? Social media and post-truth politics," *European Journal of Communication*, Vol. 33(2), p. 6.

40. See Vogl, *Capital and Ressentiment*, p. 129.

41. See William J. Brady, Julian A. Wills, John T. Jost and Jay J. Van Bavel (2017) "Emotion shapes the diffusion of moralized content in social networks," *PNAS* 114(28), pp. 7313-7318; Steve Rathje, Jay J. Van Bavel and Sander van der Linden (2021) "Out-group animosity drives engagement on social media," *PNAS* 118(26); Pew Research Center (2017) "Partisan Conflict and Congressional Outreach: Partisan criticism generates most engagement in social media; most liberal and conservative legislators, party leadership more likely to 'go negative'," *Pew Research Center*, Feb. <https://www.pewresearch.org/data-labs/2017/02/23/partisan-conflict-and-congressional-outreach/>.

42. For a summary of various recent studies, see Gloria Mark (2023) *Attention Span: A Groundbreaking Way to Restore Balance, Happiness and Productivity*, Hanover Square Press.

43. For more information on digital tribalism, see Bernard Cova and Laurence Dessart (2023) "You'll Never Walk Alone: Socializing and Finding Your Tribe in a Digital Age," *The Routledge Handbook of Digital Consumption,* Routledge, pp. 218-228; M. Asher Lawson, Shikhar Anand and Hemant Kakkar (2023). "Tribalism and tribulations: The social costs of not sharing fake news," *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 152(3), pp. 611-631; Samantha North, Lukasz Piwek and Adam Joinson (2021) "Battle for Britain: Analyzing events as drivers of political tribalism in Twitter discussions of Brexit," *Policy & Internet,* 13(2), pp. 185-208; Fangshi Lin, Hock-Hai Teo and Yingda Zhai (2022) "Breaking Online Tribalism: Motivated Reasoning, Empathy and Polarization," *ICIS 2022 Proceedings*, 5; Tyrone L. Adams and Stephen A. Smith (eds.) (2009) *Electronic Tribes: The Virtual Worlds of Geeks, Gamers, Shamans, and Scammers*, University of Texas Press.

44. See Jonathan Haidt (2022) "Why the Past 10 Years of American Life Have Been Uniquely Stupid," *The Atlantic* (May), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/05/social-media-democracy-trust-babel/629369/>.

45. Andrea Ceron (2017) *Social Media and Political Accountability: Bridging the Gap between*

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Science Review, 116(1), pp. 1-18.

46. See Jonathan Haidt and Tobias Rose-Stockwell (2019) "The Dark Psychology of Social Networks," *The Atlantic* (Dec.), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/12/social-media-democracy/600763/>.

47. Further, as Rensmann writes, "the ubiquitous political relativization, inversion, and destabilization of factual truth on social media also further advances the polarization of politico-cultural conflict, insofar as truth is increasingly seen as either unrecognizable or irrelevant among groups of voters as long as claims support one's ideological cause or political convictions." Rensmann, "The Noisy Counter-Revolution," p. 131.

48. Theodor W. Adorno (1998) "Opinion Delusion Society" *Critical Models*, Columbia University Press, p. 109. Although without reference to digital communications platforms, Philip Hogh aptly describes how the algorithm feedback of information for the formation and circulation of opinion dogmatizes tenacious worldviews. See Philip Hogh (2026) "Critique of Common Nonsense: First Steps Towards a Critical Theory of Common Sense," *Journal of Social and Political Philosophy* 5.1, p. 104.

49. The emphasis on form here follows the lineage of Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (1985), who drew on Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964), which argued that the *form* of media communicates more than its particular *content*.

50. Adorno, "Opinion Delusion Society," p. 106.

51. Ibid., p. 115.

52. Ibid., p. 111.

53. Törnberg and Uitermark, "Tweeting ourselves to death," p. 586.

54. Jäger, *Hyperpolitics*, p. 43.

55. Günther Anders (2018) *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen 2: Über die Zerstörung des Lebens im Zeitalter der dritten industriellen Revolution*, C.H. Beck, p. 251.

56. Günther Anders (1987) *Gewalt, Ja oder Nein? Eine notwendige Diskussion*, Knaur, p. 31.

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his delegate, is rather an *ignorance* (produced by interested parties) of the matter under discussion; an ignorance that appears not only as an opinion, but as a well-founded expert judgement. […] *Even self-stultification is a job for which the job holder not only allows himself to be paid, but to which he even lays claim, as to a precious entitlement.*" Günther Anders (1992) "Die Antiquiertheit des Proletariats," *FORVM*, No. 462-464 (July).

57. While it is no secret that public opinion research emerged out of large-scale economic enterprises, with industry and trade clients seeking to identify and carve out market tendencies and consumer preferences with higher probability, the sampling methods of public opinion research inherited a conception of the individual as "a customer who has to decide between the reified and fixed alternatives put forward by an organized economy and society." Friedrich Pollock, Theodor W. Adorno et al. (2011) *Group Experiment and Other Writings: The Frankfurt School on Public Opinion in Postwar Germany*, Harvard University Press, p. 28.

58. Ibid., p. 25.

59. Ibid., p. 25.

60. Günther Anders (2016) "On Promethean Shame," *Prometheanism: Technology, Digital Culture and Human Obsolescence*, Rowman & Littlefield, p. 50.

61. For an invaluable reservoir of ever-expanding studies on such adverse affects of social media, see Jonathan Haidt, Zach Rausch and Jean Twenge (ongoing) *Social media and mental health: A collaborative review*, Unpublished manuscript, New York University, <tinyurl.com/SocialMediaMentalHealthReview>.

62. Adorno, "Theory of Pseudo-Culture," p. 33.

63. Anders, "On Promethean Shame," p. 39.

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